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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/06/2018

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SUBJECT: DEMARCHE TO THE SAUDIS ON POTENTIAL DEPORTATION OF
INDIAN CHRISTIANS IN TAIF

REF: (A) RIYADH 1162 (B) RIYADH 1170

Classified By: Charge' d'Affaires Michael Gfoeller for reasons 1.4 (b)
and (d)

11. (S) SUMMARY: Early on the morning of August 6, the Charge' d'Affaires contacted Saudi Ambassador to the U.S. Adel al-Jubeir and MOI Major General Dr. Sa'd al-Jabry regarding the case of fourteen Indian Christians in Taif who are awaiting deportation (reftel A). The Charge' explained the potential negative consequences of this action, which would appear to contradict both the spirit and letter of King Abdullah's Madrid Interfaith Dialogue (reftel B). Al-Jubeir responded by saying that the case might not be what it seems to be, suggesting that the Indian Christians may be involved in fundraising in support of proselytization. MG al-Jabry stated bluntly that the SAG no longer has a policy of arresting or deporting non-Muslims for practicing their faith in private. However, he also raised the issue of fundraising tied to proselytization, noting that such activity would be clearly against Saudi law. Both officials promised to look into the case more closely. Al-Jubeir specifically promised to raise the case with the Foreign Minister. END SUMMARY.

12. (S) The Charge' called Saudi Ambassador to the U.S. Adel al-Jubeir, who was in Morocco with King Abdullah bin Abd al-Aziz, to raise the issue of the pending deportations of the 14 Indian Christians in Taif. The Charge' made the point that such an action would contradict the substance and spirit of the Madrid Conference. The Charge' informed Al-Jubeir that this issue has already received negative press in the United States, adding that if the deportations were implemented, the negative consequences for Saudi Arabia could be considerable. Al-Jubeir thanked the Charge' for this information, and explained that "such cases are not always what they seem to be." He stated that these Christians were apparently involved in fundraising, adding that the money raised could be used for proselytizing. Noting that such activities are illegal in Saudi Arabia, he advised the Charge' to follow up with MG Sa'd al-Jabry of the MOI for further information. Al-Jubeir assured the Charge' that he would speak to Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al-Faisal and the MOI about this case personally.

13. (S) In his subsequent conversation with al-Jabry in the early morning of August 6, the Charge' raised the same points. Al-Jabry responded that, "The government of Saudi Arabia no longer has a policy of arresting such people

(non-Muslims)." He said, however, that "in this case, the individuals had been raising money which could be used for proselytizing." He assured the Charge' that he would further check into the case.

¶4. (S) COMMENT: Our conversations with both SAG officials confirmed that the senior level of the Saudi government is aware of this issue, although the case undoubtedly had its genesis with the local authorities in Taif. While it appears that some fundraising may have been taking place, we cannot confirm the money collected was to be used for proselytizing.

Indeed, that possibility seems unlikely, since foreign residents of the Kingdom are generally acutely aware of Saudi laws in this area. While executions for proselytizing have not been seen in years in Saudi Arabia, in theory it is an offense punishable by death. Deportation may be seen by some Saudi officials as the mildest form of action to punish and prevent proselytizing.

¶5. (S) Private non-Muslim religious worship in Saudi Arabia is usually tolerated, as has been often confirmed to us by several senior SAG officials. However, despite the liberalizing policies of Saudi King Abdullah, the possibility of non-Muslim proselytization still elicits a strong response among conservative elements of the public here. Moreover, we suspect that religious conservatives may have decided to use this case as a provocation in reaction to the King's Interfaith Dialogue in Madrid, which has been widely criticized by conservative elements in Saudi society. It is probably also no accident that this incident arose while the King was out of the country. Per our latest information, the Taif Christians have not yet been deported. We will continue

to monitor the situation closely and report developments as they occur. END COMMENT.
GFOELLER